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ABSTRACT

Alternative forms of evaluating student progress are changing testing or assessment in U.S. schools. From the teacher-made to the standardized test, the familiar over-emphasis on multiple-choice items is giving way to expanded generative formats in which students are called upon to demonstrate mastery through applications in which they use complex processes and webs of knowledge and skill. This Digest discusses three implications that changing assessment types will have for the social studies. First, to enable students to succeed on alternative assessments, it is imperative that the traditional social studies curriculum be re-examined and reorganized to insure mastery of knowledge, cognitive processes, and behaviors that characterize civic competence. Second, social studies instruction must provide students with real experiences as active and producing members of the community, structured to allow practice in thinking and acting as citizens. Third, assessment should no longer be viewed as separate from instruction. Students should have a clear understanding of expected outcomes of instruction and how evaluation will occur. A list of 12 references is included. (DB)

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Alternative Assessment: Implications for Social Studies

by Pat Nickell

Alternative forms of evaluating student progress are changing testing or assessment in our schools. From the teacher-made to the standardized test, the familiar over-emphasis on multiple-choice items is giving way to expanded generative formats in which students are called upon to demonstrate mastery through applications in which they use complex processes and webs of knowledge and skill.

Issues Triggering the Call for Change. Two general issues have come to the fore regarding the evaluation of student achievement in schools: (1) the format of tests; and (2) how test results are used. Accusations regarding the misuse and overuse of tests are certainly disturbing, but there is no guarantee that this issue will be solved simply by changing test types. Whatever the format of the test, if scores continue to be used to classify and track children, the underlying issues remain unresolved. If the numbers of standardized tests administered are maintained at current rates, then our students will continue to be the most thoroughly and frequently tested students in the world, no matter what type of test is administered. However, the remaining issue—that of format and whether continued emphasis on fixed-response testing is valid—is one which reaches directly into the classroom and has clear implications for teachers.

It is widely recognized that alternative assessments are gaining broad acceptance. Large commercial test publishers are beginning to revamp standardized achievement and college entry tests to give greater emphasis to generative-response items as a result of pressure from proponents of alternative assessment. The Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing found that as of 1990, nearly half of all states in the U.S. were considering implementation of some form of performance assessment in state-level testing. However, teachers maintain control over the form and structure of student assessment in the classroom. If students are to succeed on state and national assessments administered in performance-based formats, such formats must be acceptable to teachers and used in classrooms.

The familiar "test"—anything from a ten-item pop-quiz to a standardized achievement test—has, during the twentieth century, come to be dominated by the presumably "objective" format of fixed-response items, most notably multiple-choice. Critics, however, argue quite convincingly that traditional fixed-response testing does not provide a clear or accurate picture of what students can do with their knowledge. Such testing enables students to demonstrate recall, comprehension, or interpretation of knowledge, but not to demonstrate ability to *use* knowledge.

Critics also assert that standardized, fixed-response testing may be unfairly misaligned with instruction. Questions may be "missed" simply because of unfamiliar language or format—not because the student has no grasp of the concept. Further, detractors maintain that testing isolated facts in an arbitrary order confuses test takers and ignores the importance of holistic "knowing" and integration of knowledge. While it has been strongly argued that fixed-response tests can assess high levels of thinking, proponents of alternative assessments contend that traditional tests are a central cause for the preponderance of low-level cognitive activities in the classroom. In short, multiple-choice testing—whether used to measure student achievement at the classroom, state, or national level—is charged with being a non-authentic means of assessing students' mastery of either high-level educational objectives or society's expectations.

The Testing Revolution and Social Studies. According to the National Council for the Social Studies, the goal of social studies education is to promote civic competence. The primary purpose is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. An outcomes-based approach requires that we test in authentic ways what is considered to be most important in terms of knowledge, skill, values, and attitudes. Thus, if civic competence is highly valued, then students should be able to demonstrate mastery of civic competence through realistic tasks which match the demands and expectations of society.

Fixed-response testing cannot assess students' ability to function as a competent participant in society. We can learn a great deal from such testing about what the students know about history, geography, government, national policy, global conditions, and the like. This knowledge, of course, is a necessary foundation for critical thinking and civic decision-making. However, in terms of how students might go about using knowledge to examine an issue, make a decision, research an idea and synthesize that research in order to make a presentation, initiate a project and see it through, or even evaluate the original idea, we have little to go on. If we really expect students to be able to do these things, then assessment instruments must be designed to provide evidence that such is the case.

Implication 1: The Social Studies Curriculum. The most critical implication of changing assessment types is a curricular one. Grant Wiggins (Nickell 1992) refers to performance assessment as "exhibitions of mastery." What is it, within the area of social studies, that is to be mastered? Can one, in fact, "master" civic competence in the same way that one can master multiplying three-digit numbers or writing poetry in sonnet form? Returning to the goal and purposes set forth by the National Council and reflected in most school systems' goals and missions statements, we are forced to consider the integrative nature of social studies. If our intended outcome is to enable all students to become competent citizens, we must give less emphasis to mere recall and low-level comprehension of facts and concepts, and more emphasis to applying knowledge to tasks that require high-level cognition. Competent citizens make informed deci-

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sions; offer reasonable solutions to social and civic problems; and acquire, synthesize, and communicate useful information and ideas.

An assessment designed to match the goal and purposes of social studies will evaluate student mastery of knowledge, cognitive processes, and skills. To enable students to succeed on such an assessment, it is imperative that the traditional social studies curriculum be reexamined and reorganized to insure mastery of knowledge, cognitive processes, and behaviors that characterize civic competence.

Implication 2: Social Studies Instruction. A second major implication targets social studies instruction. Students must venture into the real world in order to know it. They must do so in ways that will provide real experiences as active and productive members of the community, structured to allow practice in thinking and acting as citizens. They must be given opportunities to make decisions which have real consequences; choices that affect the success or failure of an idea. They must experience how problem-solving is enhanced by cooperation, and how planning is enriched by identifying alternative means to achieve an end. "Doing" social studies, like doing mathematics, science, or art is imperative, yet it has been lost to the limitations placed on schools by tight schedules and budgets. The school day should be restructured in order that authentic social studies instruction, involving civic learning in the community, replaces that which relies only on symbols and contrivances. However, the most effective community-based civic learning activities are tightly connected to classroom-based learning of pertinent knowledge and skills.

Implication 3: Social Studies Assessment. A third major implication targets the way we treat assessment in social studies. Assessment should no longer be viewed as separate from instruction. Just as the worker is evaluated on an ongoing basis on the products or services generated, student evaluation is most authentic and equitable when it is based upon the ideas, processes, products, and behaviors exhibited during regular instruction. Students should have a clear understanding of what is ahead, what is expected, and how evaluation will occur. Expected outcomes of instruction should be specified and criteria for judging degrees of success clearly outlined. Where a certain level of knowledge about a particular topic is expected of all students, it should be understood in advance. Responsibility for each student's success is initially shared by the teacher and student, but once teachers have fulfilled their part, ultimate accountability rests with the student. Thus, the social studies classroom becomes a microcosm of the real world in which social/civic responsibility and participation is an ongoing process, uninterrupted by "time-outs" for the incongruity of formal testing.

Social studies, often considered to be the most content-oriented of the core curriculum areas, is ripe for reform. The call for alternative assessments only serves to highlight the importance of rethinking current practice in social studies as we recognize once again the close link between the over-arching goal of public education and that of social studies. As the nation moves toward assessments of student achievement which are more closely aligned with what is demanded of us in the real world and which demand student-generated demonstrations of mastery, traditional practices in social studies are called into question. Both curriculum and instruction, often geared toward low-level recall of facts, must be revisited. Test-teach-test modes, in which assessment is treated as separate from instruction, also deserve to be reexamined with regard to how well such practice mirrors how we are evaluated in the real world. Whether or not alternative assessments take hold at state and national levels, the trend has brought us face-to-face with our responsibility as social studies practitioners in schools and classrooms. Traditional practices cannot effectively prepare young people to demonstrate achievement of civic competence.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system. They are available in either microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For ordering information, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS. However, the journals can be located in the periodical sections of most libraries or the articles can be ordered through Interlibrary Loan by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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